



**RECEIVED**

File Code: 1950-1

**DEC 18 2007**

Date: December 13, 2007

**Ravalli County Commissioners**

Dear Interested Party,

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Last March you received a request for comments on the Lower West Fork Project on the West Fork Ranger District. I am once again sending out a request for comments on the project. The reason to reinstate scoping for this project is that the proposed action has changed. Changes were made to the proposal as a result of the Rombo fire this past summer and some proposed treatments have been expanded following field work by resource specialists. These expanded treatments respond to some comments as well as better meeting the purposes of the project, particularly of reducing fuel loading and crown fire hazard. If you commented last spring and choose to leave your response as is, I thank you for your time. Comments received last spring will be a part of the project file and used in the analysis. If you wish to add to or change your comment, please provide your input by January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008.

Once again, the project area lies generally between Trapper Creek Job Corps Center and the Nez Perce Fork road junction (vicinity map and scoping maps 1-4). The analysis area encompasses nearly 38,400 acres.

**What is the origin of this proposal?**

The Lower West Fork Project area, which is located in the Lower West Fork Bitterroot River drainage, is one of several areas on the Bitterroot National Forest identified as high priority for interface fuel reduction work through the Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan (DNRC et al., 2005) [www.bitterrootfireplan.org](http://www.bitterrootfireplan.org). Priority setting was based primarily on forest and fuel conditions, population density, and buildings and other improvements. The Lower West Fork Project is designed to respond to goals and objectives of the Community Plan, National Fire Plan, and the Bitterroot Forest Plan. The project is designed to help move the project area toward desired future conditions described in these plans. Currently, all proposed actions occur in 1987 Bitterroot Forest Plan Management Areas 1 (Timber Emphasis), 2 (Winter Range Emphasis), and 3a (Partial Retention).

**What is the purpose of the project?**

The purpose and need for the project is not new to the Forest Service or the community. The Lower West Fork Project is being designed after the successful Frazier Interface Project (2003) [map 1], which has been recently implemented following the collaborative work of the Forest Consensus Council (FCC). The Council consisted of people with different backgrounds and interests who seek common ground and consensus around natural resource issues in the Bitterroot Valley. Additionally, the Lower West Fork project complements fuels reduction



efforts taken on by the Triple Creek Ranch over the last several years and the recent School Point Ecoburn project (2006) just to the southwest [map 4].

The treatments are needed to: 1) Reduce fuel loading and lower crown fire hazard in low elevation ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir forests; 2) Improve forest health and stand resilience to natural disturbances (fire, insects, disease); particularly the health and resilience of large diameter ( $\geq 21$ " dbh) Ponderosa pine trees; 3) Maintain or increase shade intolerant species (aspen, ponderosa pine); 4) Improve overall soil, watershed and fisheries conditions through reducing road impacts and restoring soils on terraced lands in the area.

We intend to maintain detailed information on the Bitterroot National Forest website including images of existing conditions, similar completed or on-going projects, and examples of desired future conditions. Information may be found at the following link:[http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/bitterroot/projects/lower\\_wf.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/bitterroot/projects/lower_wf.shtml)

### **What are the components of the project?**

#### **Vegetation and Hazardous Fuel Management**

We propose vegetation management treatments to reduce crown fire hazard, treat fuels, and improve forest health in the Lower West Fork area. Our proposed action is designed to reduce the potential impacts of a wildfire by increasing the likelihood that future wildland fires would burn on the forest floor as opposed to the tree crowns. This would make conditions safer for firefighters and better protect private property in the area. Our treatments are also designed to sustain large trees for the future and maintain or increase intolerant tree species.

A variety of mechanical, commercial and non-commercial methods would be employed. Thinning treatments will increase crown spacing, favoring large ponderosa pine and the large, healthy trees of other species. This will reduce risk to stand-destroying wildfire and improve forest health by making stands more resilient to insects and disease. The proposed commercial treatments include thinning from below; removal of individual dead, dying and diseased trees; and creating small openings to regenerate aspen or reduce crown fire. Commercial forest thinning activities may be accompanied by utilization or slashing of small, non-commercial understory trees, hand piling slash, and/or prescribed burning. It is expected that treatments would reduce the overstory canopy between 20% and 60%, depending upon existing conditions.

No permanent road construction is planned for the purpose of timber harvest. (See #5 in the watershed and fisheries improvement section for information about road construction related to watershed improvements.) However, maintenance of existing roads will occur in association with approved management, and some temporary roads may be necessary to harvest some units.

The proposed vegetation management activities include [maps 1-4]:

- Forest thinning (commercial) of predominantly ponderosa pine / Douglas-fir stands using tractor and / or skyline harvesting (approximately 3,035 acres). About 250 acres of this would occur on previously terraced plantations along with soil restoration work (see Soil, Watershed and Fisheries section for more information).
- Non-commercial thinning of young forest stands (approximately 330 acres)

- Prescribed burning (pile burning and underburning) that may be preceded by slashing of small trees ( $\leq 10''$  dbh) and hand piling (approximately 1.715 acres)

### **Soil, Watershed and Fisheries Management**

Soil, watershed and fisheries projects include re-alignment, decommissioning, and storage of existing roads; culvert removal and replacement for fish passage; and spot graveling. Road decommissioning and storage have the additional benefit of improving wildlife habitat effectiveness, especially for Rocky Mountain elk, through strategic reduction of road densities. Recent road stabilization actions continue to be accomplished in the vicinity through the Nez Perce Watershed Restoration and Travel Management project decision (1997).

Where proposed vegetation treatments overlap proposed watershed and fisheries projects, watershed and fisheries actions would be planned for implementation either concurrently with, or after, the vegetation treatment. A road may be used to access vegetation treatment(s) and then decommissioned or stored.

The official definition for a 'decommissioned' road is that it is no longer needed and is dropped from the official transportation system. 'Stored' roads remain on the transportation system after the appropriate stabilization and rehabilitation has been completed. Treatments (on-the-ground) on a stored or decommissioned road can be identical. Stored or decommissioned road rehabilitation may simply involve closure and natural regeneration, provided no additional watershed stabilization work is necessary. Stored or decommissioned roads may or may not have rehabilitation designed to allow acceptable Off Highway Vehicle use. This will depend upon assessment of current approved uses.

The proposed soil, watershed and fisheries management activities include improving fish passage and reducing the impacts of roads as shown below and on maps 1-4. Also, 250 acres of terraced plantations are proposed for soil restoration work to address compaction and displacement of soils.

1. Replace seven fish barrier culverts with fish-passable structures. The new structure could be a larger culvert, an open-bottomed arch, or a bridge. After installation of the new structure, the road crossing would be spot graveled.
  - 1) Lavene Creek, lower crossing of Road 5630 [map 4]
  - 2) Lavene Creek, middle crossing of Road 5630 [map 4]
  - 3) Lavene Creek, upper crossing of Road 5630 [map 4]
  - 4) Ward Creek, lower crossing of Road 373 [map 4]
  - 5) Ward Creek, upper crossing of Road 373 [map 4]
  - 6) Britts Creek, Road 49 [map 3]
  - 7) Castle Creek, middle crossing of Road 49 [map 3]
2. Remove two fish barrier culverts. Restore the natural shape of the stream channel at the site of the former road crossings. Build an ATV ford on the Road 13411 crossing of East Piquett tributary 2.0.
  - 1) Pierce Creek, Road 13466 [map 1]

2) East Piquett tributary 2.0. Road 13411 [map 2]

3. Spot gravel three road crossings of fish-bearing streams:

- 1) Piquett Creek. Road 49 [map 2]
- 2) Piquett Creek. Road 5720
- 3) Baker Creek. Road 363 [map 1]

4. Install two fish screens, one on the irrigation ditch on Ward Creek [map 4], and one on the Baker Creek ditch near the Forest boundary [map 4]. Unscreened ditches are capable of diverting and trapping both upstream and downstream moving fish. Fish swim into the ditches and cannot find their way back to the stream.

5. Potential road/intersection realignments at two junctions: (1) the intersection of Roads 373 and 5632 near Ward Creek; and (2) the intersection of Roads 5630 and 5630-A near Lavene Creek. In both instances, roads switchback across the stream twice in very short distances. This has created two fish barrier culverts within 50 feet of each other on both Ward and Lavene Creeks. If we are able to realign these two intersections, we will need to build a short distance of new permanent road at both locations. However, we would also be obliterating a short distance of existing road. The amount of new construction versus the amount of obliteration would result in no net gain of 'new' road.

6. Maintenance and repairs on three existing closed roads (Roads 13464, 13837, 74321) to stabilize sediment sources (not mapped).

7. Store approximately 19.3 miles of existing roads. Existing roads stored after their use in the proposed Lower West Fork project amount to approximately 10.7 miles. There are approximately 8.6 miles of road to be stored that are not associated with other Lower West Fork treatments.

**Proposed Lower West Fork Road Storages**

Road Number	Drainage	Miles	Treatment Needs	Road Potentially Used with Other Proposed Treatments?	Map Number
363	Baker	1.7	Yes	Yes	1
74007	Barn/Swamp	0.6	Yes	No	4
74339	Castle	1.7	Yes	Yes (Not Commercial)	3
74605	Castle	1.4	Yes	No	3
74606	Castle	0.8	Yes	No	3
74611	Castle	0.1	Yes	No	3
13411	E Piquett	0.8	Yes	Yes	2
13456	E Piquett	1.2	Yes	No	2
13457	E Piquett	1.8	Recovering Naturally	No	2
13883	E Piquett	0.1	Yes	No	2
74319	E Piquett	0.8	Yes	Yes (Not Commercial)	2
74320	E Piquett	0.2	Yes	Yes (no)	2
13828	Lavene	0.9	Yes	Yes	4
62416	Lavene	0.6	Yes	No	4
13466	Pierce	0.6	Yes	Yes	1
13423	Piquett	1.7	Yes	Yes	2
13434	Piquett	2.7	Yes	Yes	2
13830	Violet	1.6	Yes	Yes (no)	2

8. Decommission approximately 10.3 miles of existing roads. Existing roads decommissioned after their use in the proposed Lower West Fork project amount to approximately 8.5 miles. There are approximately 5 miles of road to be decommissioned that are not associated with other Lower West Fork treatments.

**Proposed Lower West Fork Road Decommissions**

Road Number	Drainage	Miles	Treatment Needs	Road Potentially Used with Other Proposed Treatments?	Map Number
74023	Barn	0.8	Recovering Naturally	No	4
74357	Christisen	0.3	Recovering Naturally	No	4 or 1
13411	E Piquett	0.4	Yes	Yes	2
74607	Castle	0.3	Yes	No	3
13464	E Piquett	0.6	Yes	Yes	2
13834	E Piquett	0.6	Yes	No	2
13836	E Piquett	2.4	Yes	Yes (Not Commercial)	2
13838	E Piquett	0.6	Yes	No	2
74313	E Piquett	0.2	Yes	Yes (Not Commercial)	2
74347	Pierce	0.2	Yes	No	1
13421	Piquett	0.7	Yes	No	3
13422	Piquett	0.2	Yes	Yes	2
13423	Piquett	0.2	Yes	Yes (Not Commercial)	2
13832	Piquett	0.3	Yes	No	2
13831	Violet	1.3	Yes	Yes	2
74006	Ward/Wheeler	1.2	Yes	Yes	4

### **What are the next steps in the process?**

Your comments to this proposal will be used to fine tune our proposal and to develop alternative actions (including no action) to be analyzed in the environmental analysis process. At this time, we anticipate that this analysis will be documented in a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), which will be sent to people who responded to this scoping letter or the previous scoping letter. A Forest Plan Amendment specific to this project may be prepared if it is necessary. Potentially, there could be a need to amend the Plan in the areas of downed wood, snags, soils, or elk habitat effectiveness. This would be fully disclosed in the DEIS.

Public comments will be solicited on the DEIS. After comments are received they will be used by the interdisciplinary team to refine the actions in the project and to produce a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). A Record of Decision (ROD) will be prepared that specifies the decision and the rationale for it. Once the ROD is signed, it will be subject to the administrative appeal process where individuals may request that the decision be reviewed by a higher organizational level of the Forest Service.

### **How to Comment**

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments will be most helpful if received by January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008. Comments received on this project, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection.

Please submit written comments to Dave Campbell, District Ranger, West Fork Ranger District, 6735 West Fork Road, Darby, MT 59829. The office business hours for those wishing to comment in person or by phone are: 8:00- 4:30, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays (FAX- 406-821-1211). Electronic comments should be submitted in rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc) or Word Perfect format to [comments-northern-bitterroot-west-fork@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-northern-bitterroot-west-fork@fs.fed.us) Please include the name of the project in the subject line. For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt.

If you need additional information regarding this proposal, please contact me or Mike Jakober 821-1252.

Sincerely,



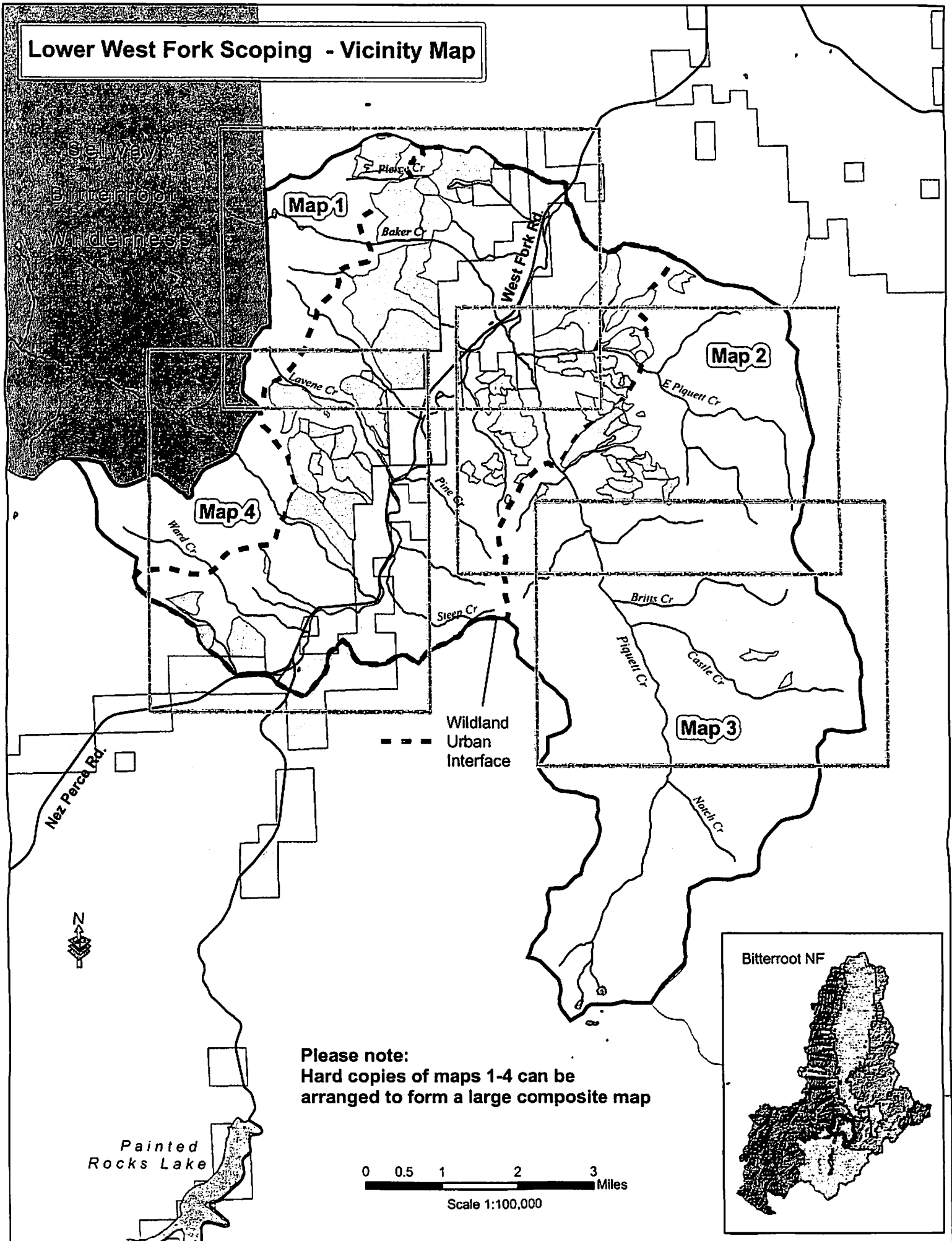
DAVID M. CAMPBELL

District Ranger

Attachments:

Vicinity & Project Maps

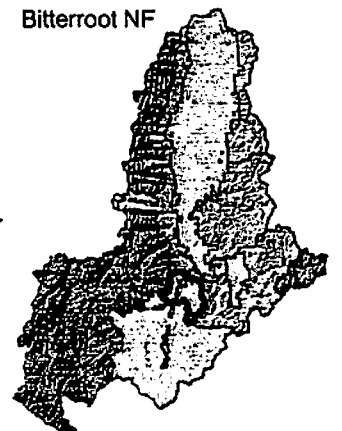
# Lower West Fork Scoping - Vicinity Map



Please note:  
Hard copies of maps 1-4 can be  
arranged to form a large composite map

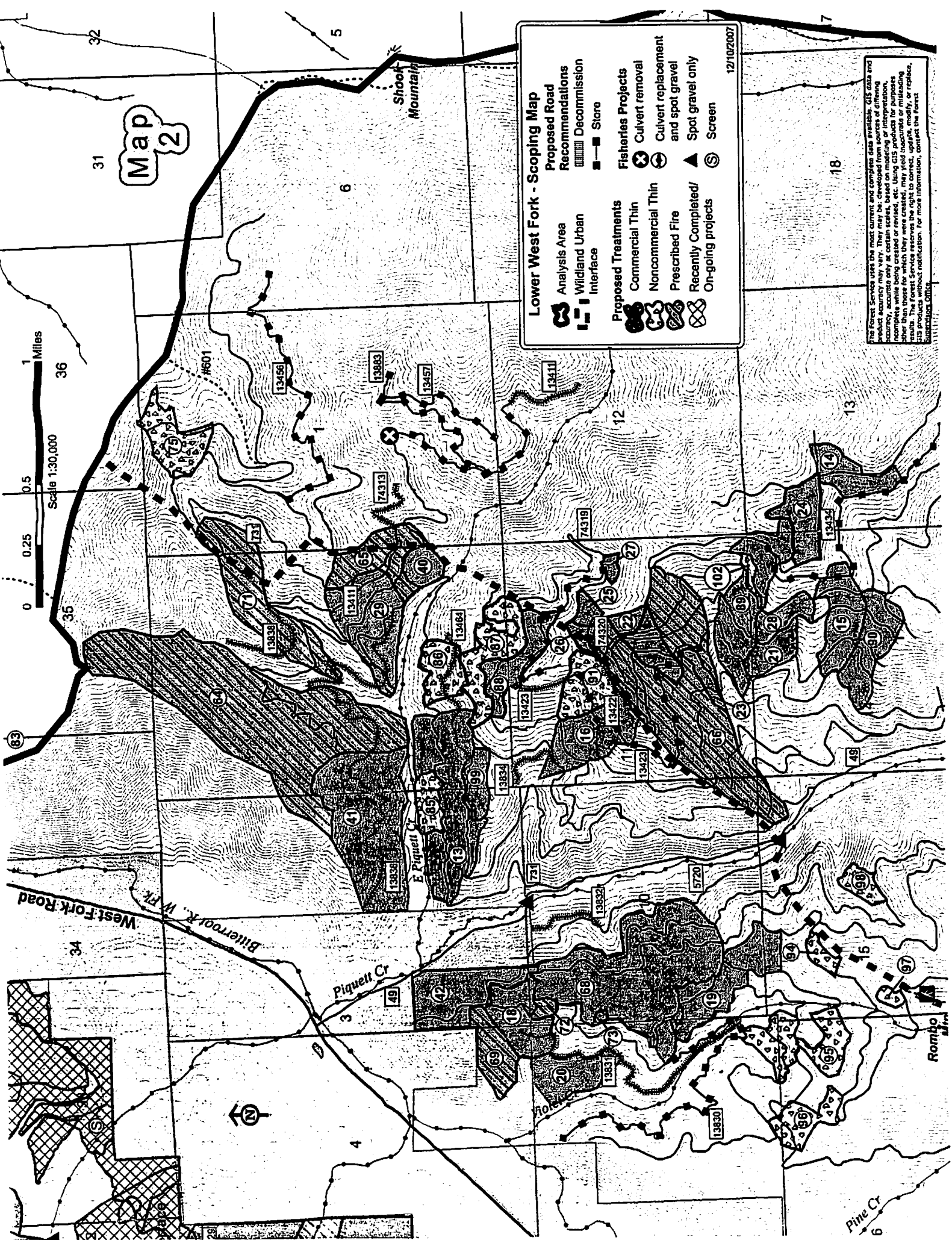
0 0.5 1 2 3 Miles  
Scale 1:100,000

Bitterroot NF



# Map 2

Scale 1:30,000  
0 0.25 0.5 1 Miles



### Lower West Fork - Scoping Map

**Analysis Area**

Wildland Urban Interface

**Proposed Treatments**

Commercial Thin

Noncommercial Thin

Prescribed Fire

Recently Completed/On-going projects

**Proposed Road Recommendations**

Decommission

Store

**Fisheries Projects**

Culvert removal

Culvert replacement and spot gravel

Spot gravel only
















Screen

12/10/2007

The Forest Service uses the most current and complete data available. GIS data and product accuracy may vary. They may be developed from sources of differing accuracy, accuracy only at certain scales, based on most current data. Data may be incomplete while being created or revised. The Forest Service does not warrant the accuracy, completeness, or suitability of the data for any purpose other than the purpose for which it was created. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace this products without notification. For more information, contact the Forest Service Office.







## Lower West Fork - Scoping Map

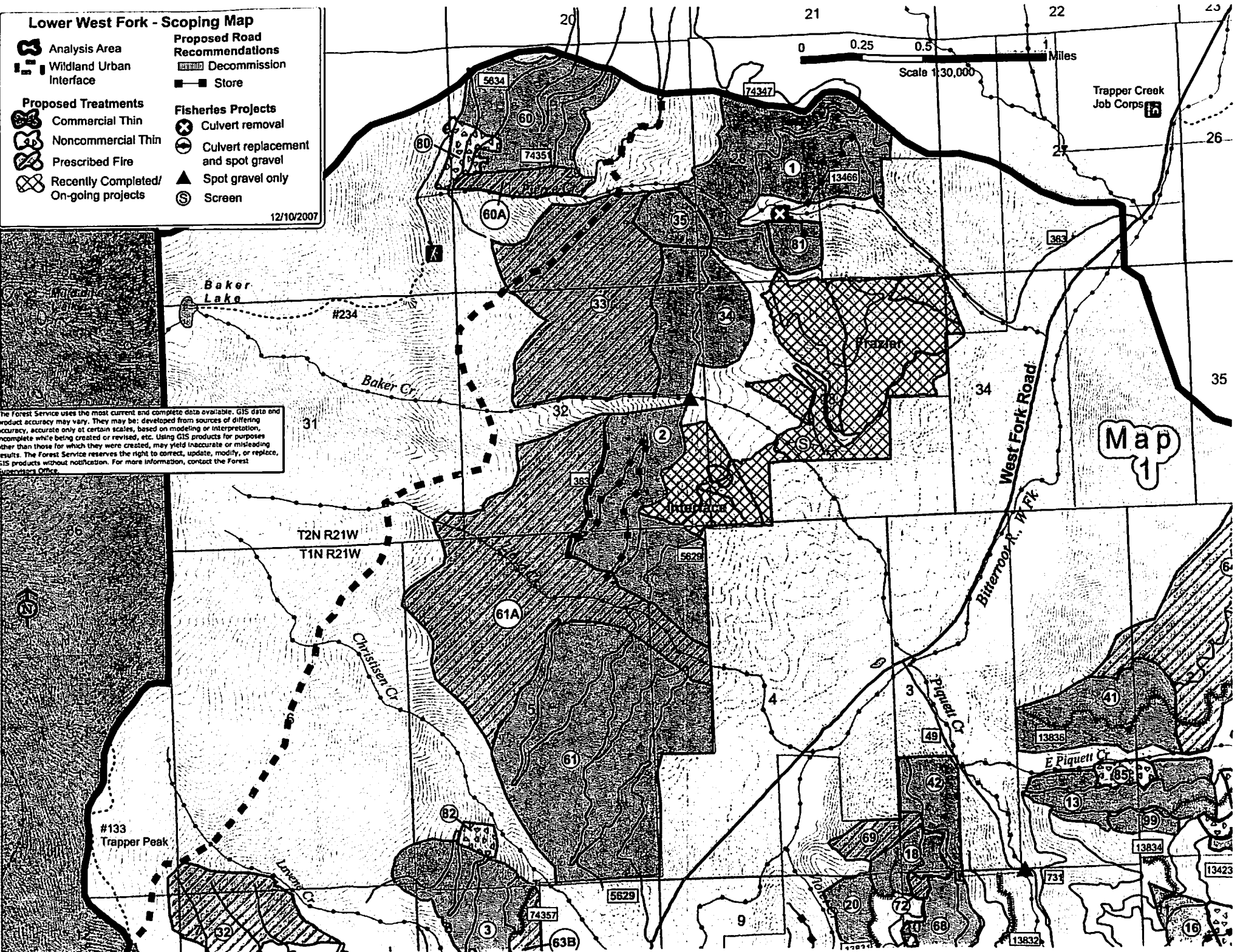
	<b>Analysis Area</b>		<b>Proposed Road Recommendation</b>
	<b>Wildland Urban Interface</b>		<b>Decommission</b>
			<b>Store</b>
	<b>Proposed Treatments</b>		<b>Fisheries Projects</b>
	<b>Commercial Thin</b>		<b>Culvert removal</b>
	<b>Noncommercial Thin</b>		<b>Culvert replacement and spot gravel</b>
	<b>Prescribed Fire</b>		<b>Spot gravel only</b>
	<b>Recently Completed/ On-going projects</b>		<b>Screen</b>

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**Fisheries Projects**

-  Culvert removal
-  Culvert replacement and spot gravel
-  Spot gravel only
-  Screen

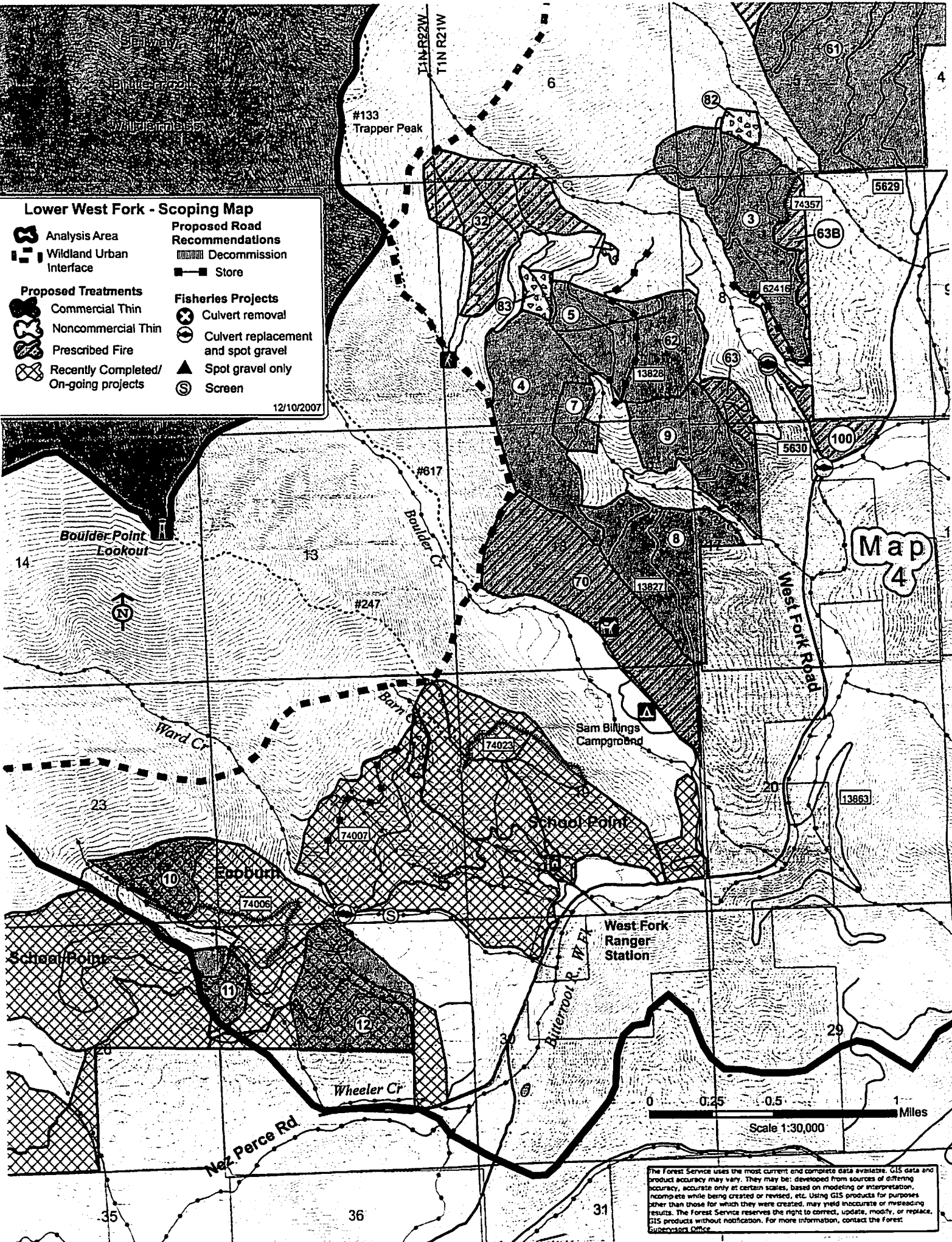
A black and white photograph of a book cover. The cover has a dense, textured pattern, possibly a woven fabric or a printed design. In the center, there is a rectangular label with the text "S. 2. H. 100" printed on it. The text is in a serif font. The background of the cover is dark and textured. The book is shown from a slightly angled perspective, showing the spine on the left.



# Lower West Fork - Scoping Map

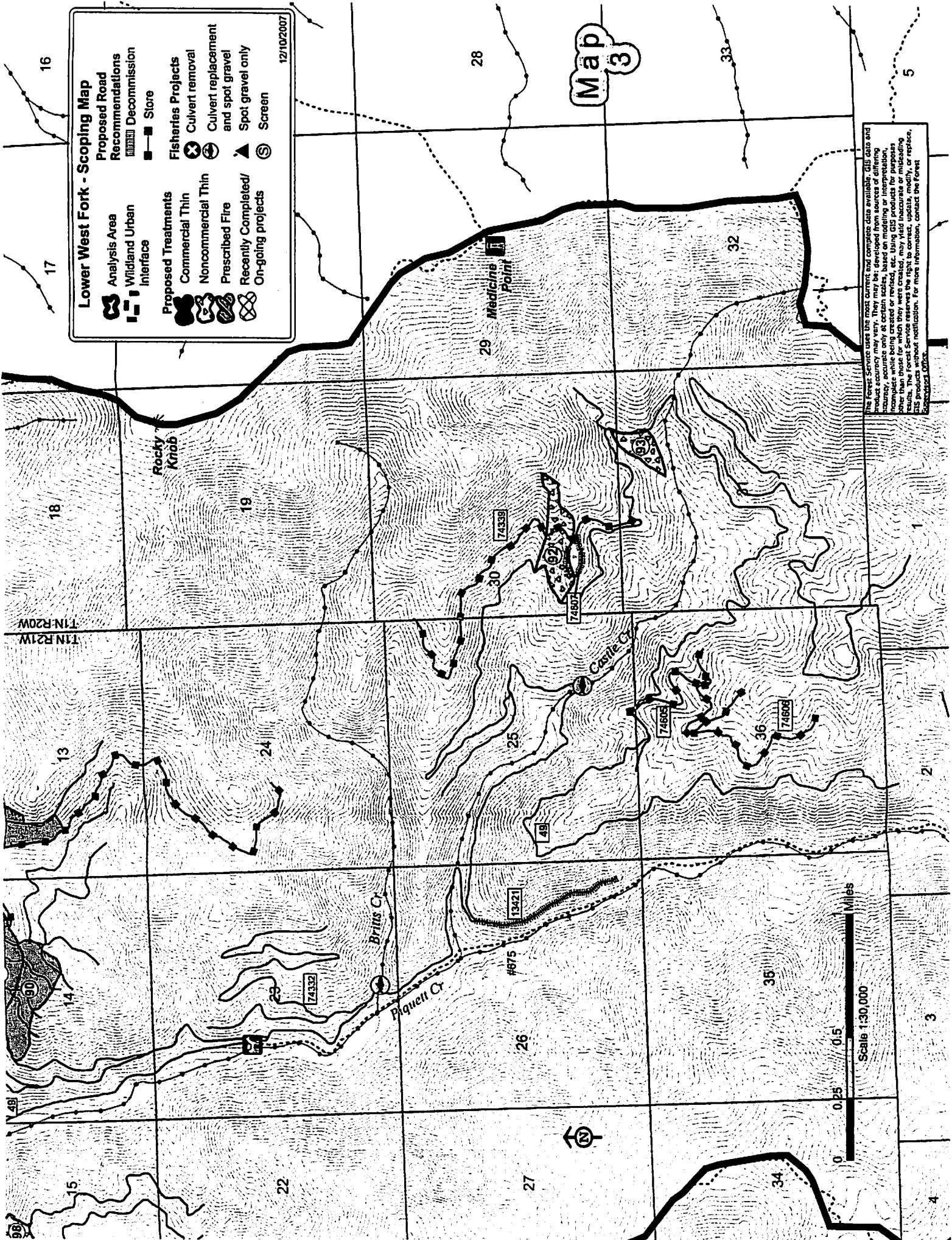
- |  |   |
|--|---|
|  Analysis Area                        | <b>Proposed Road Recommendations</b>  |
|  Wildland Urban Interface             |  Decommission                        |
| <b>Proposed Treatments</b>   |  Store                               |
|  Commercial Thin                      | <b>Fisheries Projects</b>   |
|  Noncommercial Thin                   |  Culvert removal                     |
|  Prescribed Fire                      |  Culvert replacement and spot gravel |
|  Recently Completed/On-going projects |  Spot gravel only                    |
|  |  Screen                              |

12/10/2007



Map 4

The Forest Service uses the most current and complete data available. GIS data and product accuracy may vary. They may be developed from sources of differing accuracy, accurate only at certain scales, based on modeling or interpretation, incomplete while being created or revised, etc. Using GIS products for purposes other than those for which they were created, may yield inaccurate or misleading results. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace, GIS products without notification. For more information, contact the Forest Supervisor's Office.



**Lower West Fork - Scoping Map**

**Proposed Road Recommendations**

- Analysis Area
- Wildland Urban Interface
- Decommission
- Store

**Fisheries Projects**

- Culvert removal
- Culvert replacement and spot gravel
- Spot gravel only
- Screen

**Proposed Treatments**

- Commercial Thin
- Noncommercial Thin
- Prescribed Fire
- Recently Completed/On-going projects

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